

DIVERGENT VIEWS ON THE FUNCTION OF SPECULATIVE REASONING IN INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATES

An intelligence estimate is an opinion, verifiable to the extent that it is supported by limited evidence. To speculate is to go beyond verifiable opinion into the realm of theory and conjecture. The potential dangers in doing so are, of course, the same whether the conjecture derives from information generally known or from secret intelligence.

Aside from the skill in speculative reasoning possessed by the authors of an intelligence estimate, and the presumed inability of readers to evolve satisfactory speculations of their own, the advisability or non-advisability of intelligence estimates that involve speculative thinking depends on the quantity and quality of the evidence (to what extent it will furnish support for the speculation attempted), and the purpose to be served by the estimate (whether or not a satisfactory speculative projection of the conclusions would be of value to those using it). Manifestly, certain types of estimates are better suited for speculation than others. Whenever the conclusion of an estimate leaves open important and inescapable questions to which the evidence will furnish no immediate answer, the temptation to furnish speculative answers will be present. To what extent intelligence estimators yield to the temptation is a matter of judgment.

Early Central Intelligence publications furnish numerous examples of speculative reasoning in intelligence estimates. These were usually concerned with the problem of what would be the result if an event, which had not yet happened but was a possibility, came to pass. Many

of these estimates occasioned disagreement on the part of those in and out of the Agency who felt that intelligence should not attempt to suggest conclusions beyond those supported by the immediate evidence.

Perhaps the most extreme case in point was "ORE-9" published January 13, 1948, which undertook to predict what would happen in the event of Stalin's death.<sup>1</sup> This estimate resulted in a split decision, Central Intelligence maintaining that Stalin's power would pass to Molotov; State that it would descend to a triumvirate or the equivalent. There was no positive evidence to support either conclusion; both were speculation. The estimate surmises, for example, that Stalin might have left a will, similar to Lenin's, in which he had outlined what his followers were to do after his death. In part, the estimate is based on assumptions concerning the hypothetical will's hypothetical contents. Otherwise, the conclusions necessarily rested on such material as historical analogies, what was known about the nature of the present Russian government, and guesses about the character of the person or persons who might succeed Stalin. Central Intelligence had no monopoly on such facts as these. It had virtually no secret intelligence applicable to the problem. The value of the paper, then, necessarily rested, in large part, on the presumed ability of the authors to construct conjectural hypotheses. Its usefulness, even as speculation, was somewhat impaired by a failure to project the conclusions beyond the problem of the immediate succession to Stalin.

"ORE-6-48", published six weeks before the Italian elections of April 18, 1948, is a less extreme case but furnishes another illustration of the point. Its title is "Consequences of a Communist Accession to

17/2

1. See "ORE-9", The Succession of Power in the USSR, 13 January 1948, in Historical Files.

-3-

to Power in Italy by Legal Means."<sup>1</sup>

The Office of Reports and Estimates had already attempted to forecast the results of the forthcoming Italian elections and had said that De Gasperi would probably win; yet it was impossible to place full confidence in this prediction. Presumably, the National Security Council wanted to be prepared for the consequences in case the Communists should win, and possibly to be able to judge how far the United States should go in attempting to influence the elections.

Central Intelligence, therefore, proceeded in the only way it could; to assume that the Communists already had won the elections and to follow the results from there. When the estimate was finished on this assumption, all the military agencies found it difficult to accept what they considered speculative conclusions based on an arbitrary and unproved assumption. The Navy felt so strongly on the subject that it dissented because it was "not prepared to underwrite the detailed speculative predictions derived from the assumption." (See No. )

Leaving aside the fact that Central Intelligence had been ordered by the National Security Council to write what had to be a speculative paper and conceding the fact that the Navy dissent did not present the case in very lucid fashion, a case can be made out for this point of view. For example, "ORE 6-4E" states that Soviet fighter aircraft, based in Italy, could cover all of France except Brest and Cherbourg. Assuming that Air Force intelligence knew enough about Soviet aircraft to make positive statements about the range of Soviet fighters, this

17/3

1. See "ORE 6-48", Consequences of Communist Accession to Power in Italy by Legal Means, March 5, 1948, in Historical Files.

-4-

would be a statement solidly based on intelligence. When, however, the same estimate that the result in France of a Communist victory in Italy would be a Gaullist rather than a Communist regime it must certainly have been going beyond what the intelligence on either country would positively support.

Another suggested conclusion in "ORE 6-48" is that the Soviet Union, after the assumed events in Italy, would institute a period of détente in its foreign policy. The reasoning behind this conclusion is that if the Communists were to win the elections, they would be faced with the threat of a civil war which they would want to avoid at all costs; they would, therefore, be circumspect rather than violent after victory in the elections seeking to consolidate power without provoking immediate reprisals; and in order to support this effort on the part of their compatriots in Italy, and in order to avert the threat of war arising from American and British concern over this first Communist encroachment into Western Europe, the USSR would move to relax world tension. This is an interesting theory which might have been proved valid in the event of a Communist electoral victory in Italy, but the reasoning was based on something besides concrete intelligence.

The abortive 1948 estimate on Czechoslovakia<sup>1</sup> furnishes another example. Certain facts were indisputable: that elections were to be held in May; that the Communists were the most numerous as well as the best organized party; that the Communists controlled key posts in the cabinet but did not fully control the government; and that there were strong anti-communist elements in Czechoslovakia capable of wresting

17/4

1. See Paper No. 9, "The Abortive Estimate Concerning the Czechoslovak Coup of February, 1948".

-5-

control from the Communists. All these points and more were brought into the estimate, but the ultimate conclusion is based primarily on the "strategy of the Kremlin." In the last analysis, the "strategy of the Kremlin" could only be surmised by American intelligence, which boasted little more specific knowledge of the inner workings of the Soviet "Politburo" than was generally possessed by the outside world. Hence, although it was possible to say that elections were to be held in Czechoslovakia because they had been announced and that the Czech Communists were preparing for some sort of militant action because there was genuine intelligence to back the statement, it was not possible in the same sense to say that "Kremlin strategy" required or did not require a coup d'etat in Czechoslovakia. It was not even possible, though it was a fair inference, to say for certain that the Czechoslovak Communist Party could not and would not act apart from instructions from Moscow. In general, however, the reasoning of the estimate was that the Czech Communists would not act because such action would imply risks too grave for the Soviets to accept. Hence there would be no coup d'etat in the near future.

As it happened, in the case of the Czech estimate, accurate conclusions could have been derived from the known facts without reference to the supposed intentions of the Russian government. This does not necessarily always follow. Some estimates may have to be concerned primarily with analyzing the presumed strategy of the Kremlin. Yet the fact still remains that until or unless intelligence is able to



-6-

develop bona fide information about actual Kremlin policies, the process of analyzing its motives will be speculation.

In practical terms, the question of proceeding from direct inference to speculative reasoning is not entirely in the hands of an intelligence agency but must be governed by those whom it serves. If the policy or operational command poses the question "What would happen if?" there is little the intelligence agency can do but indulge in speculation. Thus, in what is perhaps the best example of a controversy over speculation among early Central Intelligence estimates---the 1946 analysis of world-wide consequences if the United States ceded Greece to the Communists without opposition---Central Intelligence was forced into speculative reasoning by the question put to it by the National Security Council.<sup>1</sup>

The persistent objections to this paper on the part of the Agencies probably reflected, basically, a feeling that by adopting the hypothesis of no intervention by the United States, Central Intelligence was somehow suggesting that such a course of action would be advisable. If so, one could only conclude that the Agencies lacked complete understanding of hypothetical reasoning and of the function of an intelligence estimate. Apart from such an objection as this, however, the Agency protest arose from a fear that statements of hypothetical consequences---which might be made to seem persuasive but could not possibly be subjected to proof or disproof---might well become dangerously misleading.

The approach to intelligence here represented in these objections would confine estimates, such as those occasioned by the Greek Situation

17/6

1. See "ORE 10-48", Consequences of Certain Courses of Action with Respect to Greece, April 5, 1948, in Historical Files.

-7-

in 1946, to verifiable statements such as the military strength of the Greek guerrillas, their disposition, and the counter force available to the Greek government. Questions that went beyond those that could be answered with a reasonable degree of assurance on the basis of available evidence would be left to those using the estimates. Intelligence would take responsibility for no more than it could substantiate.

To limit the writers of intelligence estimates to this degree would be to risk an ultimate sterility in their product. To place no limit upon speculation would be to risk a misleading type of estimate and the ultimate projection of estimates into recommendations of policy. There is undoubtedly a tenable middle ground between the two which was not, however, discovered and agreed upon in the period under consideration.